

‘Blue Whale Challenge’: A Game or Crime?

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Abstract A bewildering range of games are emerging every other day with newer elements of fun and entertainment to woo youngsters. Games are meant to reduce stress and enhance the cognitive development of children as well as adults. Teenagers are always curious to indulge in newer games; and e-gaming is one such platform providing an easy access and quicker means of entertainment. The particular game challenge which has taken the world by storm is the dangerous “Blue Whale Challenge” often involving vulnerable teenagers. The Blue Whale Challenge is neither an application nor internet based game but the users get a link through social media chat groups to enter this “deadly” challenge game. This probably is the only game where the participant has to end his/her life to complete the game. The innocent teenagers are being targeted based on their depressed psychology and are coercively isolated from their social milieu on the pretext of keeping the challenges confidential. To add to the woes, no option is offered to quit the challenge even if the contender is unable to complete the challenge. Blue Whale Challenge in its sheer form could be seen as an illegal, unethical and inhumane endeavor in our present society. The present communication discusses the severe effects of the game on teenagers, the ethical concerns involved and the preventive measures necessary to curb it.

Keywords E-gaming · Entertainment · Ethics · Technology · Parental concern · Psychology · Fear · Suicides · Teenagers

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What is “Blue Whale Challenge”?

Blue Whale Challenge is a suicide game that was released in Russia in 2013 and includes a series of tasks that has to be completed over a period of 50 days and with each passing day the tasks become more and more dangerous and life-threatening. The game derives its name from part of the life cycle of beached whales in which the whales are linked to suicide. They usually beach themselves on a shore and die due to dehydration and their own weight. A Russian psychologist, Philipp Budeikin, claimed to be the “mastermind” behind this self-harming game was arrested in 2015 but the game is still kept active by other administrators. The inventor’s purpose is to “clean the society of biological wastes” as he intended to “clean” the society from individuals considered as a burden on the society (Thaploo 2017).

The game is famous through various names like Wake Me Up at 4:20 a.m., A Silent House, A Sea of Whales (NH Web Desk 2017) and possesses a certain set of rules and regulations which the player has to follow during the course of play. The users are not allowed to exit the game at any period of time and have to complete the given tasks at fixed timings defined by the administrator or the curator of the group. These tasks may include watching horror movies sent by the administrator at around 4:20 a.m., visiting a graveyard at odd times, listening to uncomfortable music, making cuts on one’s own arms and legs, carving a whale on one’s arm as reported by The Hindu (2017). The game is not available as an android/iOS application but is accessed via secretive links which are broadcasted and shared as pop-ups on social media sites. Following is the list of 50 challenges that the contenders face (Krishnan 2017a, b; Higgins 2017):

1. Carve with a razor “f57” on your hand, send a photo to the curator.
2. Wake up at 4.20 a.m. and watch psychedelic and scary videos that curator sends you.
3. Cut your arm with a razor along your veins, but not too deep, only 3 cuts, send a photo to the curator.
4. Draw a whale on a sheet of paper, send a photo to curator.
5. If you are ready to “become a whale”, carve “YES” on your leg. If not, cut yourself many times (punish yourself).
6. Task with a cipher.
7. Carve “f40” on your hand, send a photo to curator.
8. Type “#i_am_whale” in your VKontakte status.
9. You have to overcome your fear.
10. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to a roof (the higher the better).
11. Carve a whale on your hand with a razor, send a photo to curator.
12. Watch psychedelic and horror videos all day.
13. Listen to music that “they” (curators) send you.
14. Cut your lip.
15. Poke your hand with a needle many times.
16. Do something painful to yourself, make yourself sick.
17. Go to the highest roof you can find, stand on the edge for some time.
18. Go to a bridge, stand on the edge.

19. Climb up a crane or at least try to do it.
20. The curator checks if you are trustworthy.
21. Have a talk "with a whale" (with another player like you or with a curator) in Skype.
22. Go to a roof and sit on the edge with your legs dangling.
23. Another task with a cipher.
24. Secret task.
25. Have a meeting with a "whale".
26. The curator tells you the date of your death and you have to accept it.
27. Wake up at 4:20 a.m. and go to rails (visit any railroad that you can find).
28. Don't talk to anyone all day.
29. Make a vow that "you're a whale".
- 30.–49. Every day you wake up at 4:20 a.m., watch horror videos, listen to music that "they" send you, make 1 cut on your body per day, talk "to a whale".
50. Jump off a high building. Take your life.

The Spread of the Game

The online commanded challenge has come up from the social networking site named Vkontakte (VK.com) which is popular in European countries and especially in Russia. Its various links are shared with the focused social networking users/groups which qualifies the category of the participant selection criteria (Sharma 2017). The Internet giants involved in taking this challenge include Whatsapp, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, Yahoo and Google chat (Rediff 2017). There is no formal application for internet users but an entry to the game pops up as a directive link to a secret chat group—this is a form of virus that reads and stores each minute detail of the connected smart phone. Consequently, all personal data is compromised including browsing histories, email accounts and passwords, contacts, photos and videos by the developers and the individuals/participants as the challenge accepters get entangled in the mesh of the administrators (Krishnan 2017a).

How the Psychology of the Player is Attacked?

The psychology of the players is selected based upon the online search activity, for instance, a depressed teenager searches will be negatively oriented and take the form of why am I the most disliked person, how could I get rid of all the troubles of my life, therefore, he may fall prey to the suicidal groups that have a presence in the social network groups, to find out the ways to end his life without inculcating pain etc. Most of the time the game challenges boost up the self-esteem and encourage the depressed mind of the individual. On the other hand, if a person does not respond to the self-harming practices recommended by the administrators, such

administrators threaten and bully the player by the threat of harming their families. Consequently, they are more inclined to take the challenges either good or bad. Their state of mind is so engrossed in the game that they do not even realize that their real life is at stake.

Games are generally associated with fun, de-stressing and refreshment, mind development, enhancing the concentration ability but this game challenge is far away from virtual targets and attacks the individual by giving dares of self-harm. The developers are manipulating the psychology of the challengers to compete with other challengers leading to an increased adrenaline rush and finally forcing them to end their lives.

Death Cases in Brief

Even after the arrest of the culprit behind the deadly game, the game is still operating through its deadly roots and has claimed 100s of deaths of innocent youngsters targeted by them worldwide. It is spreading like an epidemic involving several death cases reported from all over the globe. In Russia, nearly 130 teen deaths have been linked to this suicidal game (Mullin 2017) which is by far the largest number from one country. Similar cases of suicides from game challenges have been reported in countries like Argentina, Brazil, Bulgaria, Chile, China, Italy, and US. In India, approximately 10 cases have been reported up to September 2017 by the government officials where the players were forced to self-mutilate or kill themselves by various options given by the curator like jumping from the fifth floor of a building (Pathak 2017); by covering the gamer's face with a plastic bag and tying a noose around the gamer's neck until the person dies, or by jumping in front of a running train (Wikipedia 2017).

Failed Efforts to Ban the Game

This secretive challenge activity could not be banned because of the global anonymity involved. It is difficult to trace one single individual as the administrator (TNM Staff 2017). The online phenomenon is presented to a wide field and at a personal level. Simply the curiosity seekers or perturbed teenagers are intentionally targeted by the curators. And its non-availability through the normal application stores makes it difficult to detect the menace creators. Since the game is only made available via a secretive link, banning of game is not going to do any good to the society.

Privacy, Ethical and Legal Concerns

The privacy of the participant of this game is most certainly at stake. Participation in the challenge does not consider the willingness of the participant: the curator simply targets the user based upon their weak psychological condition. The depressed and mentally weakened section of the society ultimately becomes the focused audience

for the challenge administrators. Besides, the searching behavior of the users becomes the core perspective of identifying the challenge acceptor. Such challenges do not include any legal terms and conditions for taking up the challenges. The privacy of the individual is not disclosed because every single detail of the online activity of such users is compromised without their consent and knowledge.

Most of the developing nations such as, India lack cyber bullying laws and even strategies dealing with suicides and their prevention are lacking in most countries.

Prevention is the Key

The key to prevention lies with the parents, teachers and the peer group. Some of the early warning signs that suggest a need for intervention among the teenagers engaging in this online game and the suggestions to monitor and prevent the catastrophe are mentioned below:

- Erratic or abnormal behavior of the child.
- Falling grades and performance at school or in other co-scholastic activities.
- Spending more time alone or avoiding interactions, even with family and friends.
- Monitor the online activities of children and the kind of content they engage with.
- Engage in open conversations with kids and listen to them patiently.
- Familiarize children with online safety.
- Encourage children to be media literate.
- Teach and support children to face the life challenges and appreciate small gestures.
- Observation of self-harm and injuries such as cuts and bleedings.
- Noticing very early morning activities.
- Observing visits to dangerous places-tops of buildings, rivers and lakes, roads and railways, gun shops.
- Don't let your children fall prey to the social stigma called depression, and ultimately to be an apt participant/player of Blue Whale Challenge (Pathare 2017; TNS Staff 2017; Miami Springs 2017).

Government Actions and Suggestions

Suicides are always preventable (WHO 2017). Collaborative efforts of media, legal systems, education and child development are suggested to prevent suicides. There should be national strategies and guidelines for suicide prevention and how the news related to suicides is shown in the mass media. This is particularly important because suicide is an extremely sensitive issue and its modus operandi highlighted in the media gives impetus to others for indulging in it. Various studies have reported a surge in suicide rates in teenagers and adults for varying reasons, in students and families, in occupations like farmers and armed personnel

(Ramchandranan 2014; Ponnudurai 2015; NCRB 2015). In such cases dealing particularly with vulnerable populations, prompt government action is necessary to formulate preventive laws for media coverage. Implementation of media guidelines for suicides in Vienna is reported to be responsible for a reduction in suicides (Etzersdorfer and Sonneck 1998). Thus, preventive measures suggested for the government to bring down suicides include:

1. Framing guidelines for the publicity of suicide news through mass media including cable TVs, Newspapers, and the internet.
2. Thorough a scrutiny of websites searched by the individuals to get rid of depression and aids for committing suicide.
3. Setting up health clinics for dealing with psychiatric and psychological issues of the youngsters and the troubled individuals.
4. Establish human welfare programs for creating awareness about suicide prevention among peer groups and the society.

Conclusion

The blue whale challenge, is a deadly online craze. It prompts the victim through online dares ranging from watching a scary movie at midnight, self-harming by making cuts using razors to committing suicides. Such a menace is of greater concern in India due to the higher rate of non-traceable depression especially among teenagers. The participation in a competition, game, survey or any event involves terms and conditions, but the blue whale game challenges are completely unethical leading to a gradual destruction of the society. Prompt government efforts are needed to ban such challenges, and the internet authorities should collaborate for good usage of social networking sites. The ban of destructive networking sites is in the benefit of society. Quick techno-responsive teams should be in action for human welfare and crime investigation.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of interest The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding this manuscript.

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